



THE COUNCIL OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES
ON NATIONAL ISSUES CONCERNING PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

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October 8, 1998

OCT - 8 1998

Ms. Magalie Roman Salas
Office of the Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M Street, N.W., Room 222
Washington, D.C. 20554

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

Re: In the Matter of Inquiry Concerning the Deployment of
Advanced Telecommunications Capability to All Americans
in a Reasonable and Timely Fashion, and Possible Steps to
Accelerate Such Deployment Pursuant to Section 706 of the
Telecommunications Act of 1996, CC Dkt. No. 98-146

Dear Ms. Salas:

Enclosed please find one original and four copies of Reply comments of the Council of
Organizational Representatives on National Issues Concerning People who are Deaf and Hard of
Hearing in the above captioned docket.

Sincerely,

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Before the
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Pursuant to Section 706 of the)
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**REPLY COMMENTS OF
THE COUNCIL OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES
ON NATIONAL ISSUES CONCERNING
PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING**

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I. Introduction

The Council of Organizational Representatives on National Issues Concerning People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (COR) submits these comments in response to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC or Commission) Notice of Inquiry on the deployment of advanced telecommunications services.¹ COR is a coalition of national organizations that are committed to improving the lives of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Constituencies of COR organizations provide a variety of services, including

¹ The following members of COR support these comments: American Academy of Audiology, American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, The Caption Center, Conference of American Instructors for the Deaf,

technological and telecommunications services, educational programs, support groups and self-help programs, medical, audiological, and speech-language pathology assessment and rehabilitation services, information on assistive devices and technology, and general information on other services for deaf and hard of hearing consumers. Among other things, COR serves as a bridge among interested organizations, the general public, and the community of people with disabilities on matters concerning deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

The members of COR have a direct and substantial interest in the deployment of advanced telecommunications capabilities. The deployment of high-capacity bandwidth for interactive voice, data, and video transmission can tear down many of the barriers now faced by individuals wishing to become a productive part of the workforce. As noted by Chairman Kennard, the deployment of these technologies will assist in providing "Americans with disabilities the opportunity they deserve to maximize their productivity and their enjoyment of life."²

One example of an advanced telecommunications service that can affect the lives of many deaf and hard of hearing people is video conferencing. Discussing the future availability of such a service, Chairman Kennard stated that video conferencing will be especially important for individuals who use American Sign Language[(ASL)], as they will be able to "converse with others in their native language, [and be] free to add the facial expressions and ASL nuances that are impossible to translate into English when using a TTY."³

League for the Hard of Hearing, National Association of the Deaf, Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc., and Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc.

² Press Statement of Chairman Kennard on FCC's Actions to Promote Deployment of Advanced Telecommunications Services by All Providers, August 6, 1998

³ Id.

In addition, the transmission of full and clear facial images along with spoken dialogue will be extremely useful to that segment of the hard of hearing and deaf population who rely upon speech reading in order to augment their speech comprehension. While many current teleconferencing systems are not able to transmit speech and video that are precisely synchronized (a necessary condition for successful speech reading), it is anticipated that forthcoming technological advancements will solve this problem. Moreover, as video conferencing technology is developed, the standards for such technology should include a text as well as a video component, because this will provide the best access for the broadest spectrum of users with hearing loss.

Video relay services, which use a sign language interpreter to relay calls between voice users and individuals who use sign language, can also become a critical communication tool with high speed services; these services enable relay conversations to take place in real-time. The current nationwide system of text to voice relay services is slow and cumbersome. While video relay services offer one solution to this problem for native ASL users, these services will not become widespread unless high speed transmissions become ubiquitous at affordable rates.⁴

Advanced telecommunications services also have the potential for enhancing the transmission of high quality voice by a wide range of other relay users. Under the Commission's rules on telecommunications relay services, common carriers must offer a particular relay feature called voice carry-over (VCO). Voice carry-over enables individuals (often hard of hearing or

⁴ Currently, only one state - North Carolina - offers video relay services to its residents. Although the state of Texas conducted two relay trials, the high costs of providing these services with the bandwidth available has hindered the adoption of these services as permanent offering in the Texas relay system.

late-deafened) who wish to use their own voices to do so when conducting a relay call. The VCO user simply voices his or her part of the conversation directly, and the communications assistant relays back the response in text. Unfortunately, some relay users may be refraining from the use of VCO because their speech is not intelligible to the average listener. If advanced telecommunication services can shape and clarify speech which is presently difficult to understand into a more intelligible form prior to delivery, VCO will become an alternative for more users. People who only have speech disabilities could also use this option for telephone communication, independent of any relay service.

Other advanced telecommunications services could eliminate the need for relay services altogether in certain situations. With the use of speech recognition software, conversations made by frequent voice callers, e.g., friends, families, or co-workers, to TTY users could be converted from a speech to a text format that could be displayed on a TTY or computer screen. A text-to-speech conversion would complete the communication between the TTY user and the caller.

Similarly, the demand for high-speed data and Internet services can significantly enhance the quality of life for deaf and hard of hearing Americans. Today's on-line applications are filled with complex graphic material and streaming audio and video which require higher bandwidth and faster speeds. Without further investment, the Internet may prove to be of limited value as an informational resource or as a tool to level the playing field for deaf and hard of hearing consumers. The benefits of these applications, such as telemedicine, distance learning, and telecommuting, can be staggering. However, these will only be realized for all Americans if higher bandwidth and faster speeds are made available, accessible by, and affordable to all citizens, including individuals with disabilities.

As technological growth continues, and the availability of these new technologies becomes greater, people with disabilities will have more and better options to meet their individual communication needs. Whatever regulations are developed by the Commission, care should be taken to ensure that such regulations do not close out any of these options.

To date, access to high speed bandwidth at reasonable prices has not been made widely available. COR members have received reports that even where access has been provided, the quality and effectiveness of such service have been questionable. Moreover, consumers report that there is only minimal technical support available once such service is acquired.⁵

COR does not, at this time, take a position on the means by which the FCC can best provide incentives for the deployment of advanced services to consumers. However, we do note the importance of ensuring that these services are accessible by and affordable to individuals with disabilities. Section 251(a)(2) prohibits telecommunications carriers from “install[ing] network features, functions or capabilities that do not comply with the guidelines and standards established pursuant to section 255 or 256.” Section 255 requires that all telecommunications products and services be accessible to individuals with disabilities. To the extent that the Commission seeks to adopt solutions that are intended to encourage the deployment of advanced telecommunications capabilities, the Commission must ensure that those solutions do not, in any way, diminish Section 251’s mandates for disability access.

⁵ One example of an advanced telecommunications service with which consumers have had some difficulty is ISDN. Users have reported to COR that even when purchased, this service has been expensive, has been difficult to use, and that technical support for its proper use has been inadequate.

For example, the Commission's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on advanced services, released simultaneously with the instant NOI⁶, offers incumbent local exchange companies (LECs) the option of creating separate affiliates to provide advanced services. Should this or similar proposals ultimately be adopted, they should be designed so as not to release those subsidiaries from their Section 251(a)(2) duties to provide access. Additionally, just as the Alliance for Public Technology (APT) has called for a federal/state/community based partnering for rural and low-income areas, so too should there be a similar effort with respect to accessible services for individuals with disabilities. The NOI explains that APT supports a partnership as "a necessary complement to a market-based system, because the market for advanced telecommunications capability will likely not be a perfect one."⁷ APT is correct in saying that competition will respond to populations and communities where the demand and willingness to pay for advanced services are highest.⁸ It is for this very reason that, in the past, consumers with disabilities have largely been ignored in the deployment of new telecommunications technologies. History has shown that larger companies have been reluctant to develop solutions for smaller markets. Indeed, typically, smaller companies have been the ones to come forth with technological innovations that respond to the needs of individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing. It is critical then, that an FCC solution for the rapid deployment of advanced services must be one that ensures full and equitable access to networks by all companies, including those that are likely to provide responsive innovations for smaller markets.

⁶ *In the Matters of Wireline Services Offering Advanced Telecommunications Capability*, CC Dockets Nos. 98-147, 98-11, 98-26, 98-32, 98-78, 98-91, CCB/CPD No. 98-15, RM 9244, Memorandum Opinion and Order, and Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (August 7, 1998)

⁷ NOI ¶71.

⁸ Id.

COR believes that equitable and affordable access to advanced technologies can significantly enhance the quality of life for individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing. We urge the Commission to take action to ensure that all Americans have access to the benefits of advanced telecommunications services. We thank the Commission for the opportunity to submit these comments.

Respectfully submitted,



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